

Whatever It Takes

How Professional Learning Communities Respond when Kids Don't Learn

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“Quality teaching requires strong professional learning communities. Collegial interchange, not isolation, must become the norm for teachers. Communities of learning can no longer be considered utopian; they must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America’s schools.” — National Commission on Teaching, 2003, p.17

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Our earlier works present the premise that the Professional Learning Community (PLC) offers the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools to meet their new challenges. We suggested that PLCs differ from more traditional schools in the following substantive ways:

Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

Educators in PLCs embrace the notion that the fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching.

1. What is it we want all students to learn – grade level, by course, and by unit of instruction?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve upon current levels of learning?

Educators in PLCs examine the practices and procedures of their schools to ensure alignment with this fundamental purpose of learning for all students, and they maintain an unrelenting focus on student learning.

They establish specific, measurable goals to serve as targets and timelines on their journey. This shared understanding of mission, vision, values, and goals represents the very foundation of a PLC.

Collaborative Teams

The basic structure of the PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals*.

Collective Inquiry

The teams of a PLC are organized to engage in collective inquiry into both best practice and the current reality regarding their students’ existing levels of achievement. The people in such a school are relentless in examining and questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results.

Action Orientation and Experimentation

PLCs are action oriented. Members of such organizations turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. Not only do they act, but they are unwilling to tolerate inaction.

Continuous Improvement

A persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way represent the heart of a PLC. Systematic processes engage each member of the organization in the consideration of several key questions:

1. What is our fundamental purpose?
2. What do we hope to become?
3. What are our strategies for getting better?
4. by what criteria will we assess our improvement efforts?

The goal is not simply learning a new system, but creating conditions for perpetual learning.

Results Orientation

A PLC realizes that all of its efforts in these other areas – shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams; collective inquiry; action orientation; and continuous improvement – must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions.

Leaders of PLCs promote this focus on results by using technology to provide all staff with timely, relevant, user-friendly information that enables individuals, teams, and the school at large to identify strengths and weaknesses in areas of student learning. That information drives the action research and continuous improvement processes for individual teachers and collaborative teams.

The PLC model is designed to touch the heart. The need to feel successful in our work, the need to feel a sense of belonging

Narrowing the Focus to a Critical Question

When considering its response to students who are experiencing difficulty, a school that purports to be a PLC should be able to answer the following questions in the affirmative:

- Is our response based upon **INTERVENTION** rather than remediation?
- Is our response **SYSTEMATIC**? Have we created processes that ensure we respond to students according to a school-wide plan rather than according to the discretion of individual teachers?
- Is our response **TIMELY**? How quickly are we as a school able to identify students who need additional time and support?
- Is our response **DIRECTIVE**? Do we invite students to seek additional help or does our systematic plan require students to receive the additional assistance and devote the extra time necessary to master the concept

Three Critical Questions

1. *Exactly what is it we want all students to learn?*
2. *How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?*

If a school was truly committed to ensuring that every student mastered the intended outcomes of the core curriculum, it would be vigilant in its effort to assess each student's learning on a timely, ongoing basis.

Unfortunately, once again, districts that adopted mission statements that promised "learning for all" typically failed to develop the procedures to

answer the question, “Is each student learning? Again, in some districts the nature and frequency of assessment was left to the discretion of individual teachers. More typically, district used nationally normed assessments and focused on average scores in monitoring student achievement. This strategy is flawed in at least two ways. **First**, nationally normed tests are specifically designed to distribute students along a continuum of scores. The objective of these tests is not to assess an individual student’s mastery of essential learning, but rather to differentiate between students with higher and lower scores. **Second**, average scores can hide the fact that some students are failing to achieve the intended outcomes. If a district contends that its mission is to help students learn “on average,” focusing on nationally normed test results would be appropriate, but such assessments are incongruent with the mission of helping each student learn.

Schools that operate as Professional Learning Communities use formative assessments on a frequent basis to ask, “Are the students learning and what steps must we take to address the needs of those who have not learned?” Rick Stiggins differentiates between formative and summative assessment by clarifying that the former is “assessment *for* learning” while the latter is “assessment *of* learning” (2002)

The difference between a formative and summative assessment has also been described as the difference between a physical examination and an autopsy.

3. *What happens in our school when a student does not learn?*

Marzano (2003) has described three different levels of curriculum. The **first** is the intended curriculum – what we intend for each student to learn. **Second** is the implemented curriculum – what is actually taught. **Third** is the attained curriculum – what students actually learn.

We believe this premise is fundamentally flawed. First we believe that teachers, in general, have the best interests of their students at heart and are willing to work very, very hard in the effort to help all students be successful. In fact, we contend that there are few, if any, occupations in which people work harder than teachers. Second, the idea that people can be threatened or coerced into higher performance runs contrary to what is universally recognized as best practice for leading organizations. Fear may produce some short-term efforts, but it is ineffective at generating the sustained motivation necessary to transform a school into a PLC. The NCLB threat to continue the beatings until morale improves seems far more likely to drive educators out of the profession and potential educators into other more satisfying fields than to create the energy and enthusiasm for the difficult work at hand.

Our objective is not to help schools raise test scores and avoid sanctions. Our purpose is two fold. **First**, we hope to persuade educators that we should take our mission statements literally. We should indeed promote high levels of learning for every child entrusted to us, not because of legislation or fear of sanctions, but because we have a moral and ethical imperative to do so. **Second**, it is possible to help more students succeed

at higher levels than ever before if we are willing to change many of our assumptions and practices, most of which draw their origins from earlier times when education was intended to serve a far different purpose.

HOW DO WE RESPOND WHEN KIDS DON'T LEARN?

“When you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of the situation, the right decisions often become self-evident. . . . You absolutely cannot make a series of good decisions without first confronting the brutal facts: - Jim Collins, 2001, P. 70

“Students’ learning experienced . . . with weak teaching cultures are akin to an instructional lottery, in which their learning opportunities depend heavily on which teachers they draw, from class to class and year to year.” – Milbrey McLaughlin & Joan Talbert, 2001, P. 64

The Charles Darwin School

“We believe all kids can learn . . . based on their ability.”

We believe that all students can learn, but the extent of their learning is determined by their innate ability or aptitude. This aptitude is relatively fixed, and as teachers we have little influence over the extent of student learning. It is our job to create multiple programs or tracks that address the different abilities of students and then guide students to the appropriate program. This ensures that students have access to the proper curriculum and an optimum opportunity to master material appropriate to their ability.

The Pontius Pilate School

“We believe all kids can learn . . . if they take advantage of the opportunity we give them to learn.”

We believe that all students can learn if they elect to put forth the necessary effort. It is our job to provide all students with an opportunity to learn, and we fulfill our responsibility when we attempt to present lessons that are both clear and engaging. In the final analysis, however, while it is our job to teach, it is the student’s job to learn. We should invite students to learn, but if they elect not to do so, we must hold them accountable for their decisions.

The Chicago Cub Fan School

“We believe all kids can learn . . . something, and we will help all students experience academic growth in a warm and nurturing environment.”

We believe that all students can learn and that it is our responsibility to help all students demonstrate some growth as a result of their experience with us. The extent of the growth will be determined by a combination of the student’s innate ability and effort. Although we have little impact on those factors, we can encourage all students to learn as much as possible and we can and will create an environment that fosters their sense of well-being and self-esteem.

The Henry Higgins School

“We believe all kids can learn . . . and we will work to help all students achieve high standards of learning.”

We believe that all students can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. We are confident that students can master challenging academic material with our support and help. We establish standards all students are expected to achieve, and we continue to work with them until they have done so.

Students in the same school who experience difficulty in learning will be subject to very different responses based upon the beliefs and practices of individual teachers. Until the staff of a school begins to respond to students communally rather than as individuals, the school will never become a Professional Learning Community.

A Key Shift in Assumptions: Learning as the Constant, Time and Support as Variables

A teacher in a PLC begins the unit by advising students of an *essential* outcome, an outcome so important, so significant, that every student *must* achieve it. Learning will be constant. Some students will require more time to learn, and so the school will develop strategies to provide students with that time during the school day.

The school will develop a *collective* response to assist classroom teachers by giving students extra time and extra support. Those strategies will require the cooperation of the school as a whole.

Providing Time and Support

Each staff must develop its own plan for meeting the needs of students in their unique school. No system of intervention will ever compensate for bad teaching and the most important resource in every school will continue to be the professionals within it.

The professionals within the school will also be called upon to build a collaborative culture, engage in collective inquiry regarding matters that impact student learning, participate in action research, create continuous improvement processes, and help each other monitor and improve upon results.

Ultimately there are two kinds of schools, learning enriched schools and learning impoverished schools. Teachers and students go hand in hand as learners – or they don't go at all. Roland Barth (2001)

A Scenario: A Mission Without a Plan

One of the key messages of this book is that a Professional Learning Community acknowledges the incongruity between a proposed commitment to learning for all and the absence of a coordinated strategy to respond when students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing systems and processes to ensure that students who experience difficulty receive additional time and support for their learning – regardless of who their teacher might be.

WHEN KIDS DON'T LEARN

Placement by Proficiency Rather Than by Caps and Quotas

What is it we want all students to learn? And how will we know if each student has achieved the intended outcomes by the end of eighth grade?

Summer Study Skills Course

Adlai Stevenson High School created a special summer school course to address the lack of study skills of many incoming freshman. This course, "survival Skills for High School," was designed to teach students how to take notes, annotate their reading, use a planner to organize their time and materials, read for comprehension, set goals, and communicate effectively. Parents of any student who received two or more grades of D

in middle school are specifically contacted by counselors and urged to enroll their son or daughter in this summer program. The course runs for 4 hours each day for 4 weeks each summer, and students who complete the course receive one elective credit.

The major obstacle that had to be overcome were students that have been conditioned to regard summer school as punitive. For years they have heard, “You had better improve your grades or we will force you to go to summer school.” So when parents suggested the “Survival Skills for High School” course to their children, most students were adamantly opposed to enrolling. They wanted nothing to do with the program because of the perceived social stigma of attending summer school.

Stevenson attacked this problem by expanding its summer school options in every department and beginning a concentrated effort to convince parents that every incoming freshman would benefit from enrolling in a summer school course. At every meeting with parents of 8th graders, the principal and counselors pointed out how much more comfortable students would be on the first day of high school if they had already learned their way around the building, had met students from other middle schools, had discovered what the homework load was like in a high school class and had earned a credit because of enrolling in a summer school course.

Assisting All Students with the transition to High School

- Providing extra time and support for students who experience difficulty
- Pyramid of interventions
- Conferencing and optional tutoring
- Mandatory tutoring program

OVERCOMING LOGISTICAL BARRIERS AT ADLAI STEVENSON

PROVIDING TIME AND SUPPORT FOR KIDS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: FREEPORT INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

The middle school model fits comfortably with PLC premises. The essential elements of a true middle school include:

- Educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents
- A balanced curriculum based on student needs
- A range of organizational arrangements
- Varied instructional strategies
- A full exploratory program
- Comprehensive advising and counseling
- Continuous progress for students
- Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents
- Cooperative planning
- Positive school climate

In 1989 the middle school movement gathered increasing momentum with the publication of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* by the Carnegie Foundation’s Council on Adolescent Development. *Turning Points* presented 8 major recommendations for improving the education of young adolescents, including:

1. Create small communities for learning.
2. Teach a core academics program.
3. Ensure success for all students.

4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students.
5. Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents.
6. Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents.
7. Re-engage families in the education of young adolescents.
8. Connect schools with communities.

In 1995 and 2003 the National Middle School Association again attempted to clarify key elements of the middle school concept which includes:

- Educators who are specifically prepared to work with young adolescents
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, safe, and supportive environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- An adult advocate for every student
- School-initiated family and community partnerships (NMSA,2003)

The report also assets that successful middle schools provide:

- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to student diversity
- Assessment and evaluation that promote quality learning
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services (NMSA, 2003)

Highly effective middle schools have a commitment to individual student success, a culture of collaboration and continuous and collective learning among teachers. (Valentine, 2004) these are key concepts of the PLC model.

An Exemplary Middle School: Freeport Intermediate

Freeport's efforts have been guided by the Eight Step Improvement Process (Richardson, 2004), a district initiative to implement Total Quality Management principles in all Brazosport schools. Those steps include:

- Step 1: Disaggregate data, including test results.
- Step 2: Develop an instructional calendar.
- Step 3: Deliver the instructional focus, based on the calendar.
- Step 4: Assess student mastery of the standard taught.
- Step 5: Provide additional instruction for students who did not master the assessment.
- Step 6: Provide enrichment for students who did master the assessment.
- Step 7: Provide ongoing maintenance of standards taught.
- Step 8: Monitor the process.

Building a collaborative culture is critical to the success of the school's improvement initiative.

How will we know if students are learning?

Team Time

1 hour of team time after school for students who have not mastered a skill are assigned to a teacher for additional support while those who have

demonstrated proficiency are assigned to other teachers for enrichment.

Benchmark Testing

Students take a benchmark test in preparation for their state test providing more time and support for those students who have not acquired the knowledge and skills to be proficient.

COMMON THREADS

Shared power results in higher levels of satisfaction and performance throughout the organization. It is the most significant of all the five practices of effective leaders. — James Kouzes & Barry Posner, 1987, p. 10

PLC schools are similar in that they share:

- 1. Clarity of purpose**

high levels of learning for all students.

- 2. Collaborative culture**

Promote a collaborative culture by organizing teachers into teams and building time for them to meet in the routine schedule of the school. “Build a collaborative culture, maintain common planning time for teachers, and turn to your data. “Collaborative cultures. . . are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong”

Fullan (2001)

- 3. Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality**

Teachers are more likely to agree on the most effective instructional strategies when they worked together in examining results from their common assessments.

- 4. Action Orientation**

Coherence —“the extent to which the school’s programs for students and staff are coordinated, focused on learning goals, and sustained over a period of time.” The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning is a “power coherence-maker” — Michael Fullan the process of changing the culture of any organization begins by changing the way in which the people of that organization behave (Bossidy & Charan, 2002. Schools do not see improvement until staff members begin to act differently. They must work collaboratively rather than working in isolation. They need to develop common assessments and apply consistent standards rather than acting autonomously. They need to change instructional pacing and strategies based on new insights into pedagogical effectiveness. They must recognize that, until they began to act differently, to do differently, there is little reason to expect different results.

- 5. Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

The perpetual disquiet and constant search for a better way that characterizes these schools results in the routine practices of the school. The systems that are in place call upon every team and every teacher to identify and attack areas for improvement. If a team analyzes student achievement data and discovers that a particular math concept is the most problematic for their students, the team discusses the issue, develops strategies for addressing the problem, implements the strategies in their classrooms, and gathers new information to assess the impact of the strategies on student achievement. If their efforts have been successful, they can (and should) celebrate the improvement, but they will also shift their efforts to identify and addressing the next, most problematic concept.

The creation of a PLC does not call for the completion of a series of tasks, but for a process of continuous improvement and perpetual renewal. The PLC process is energizing rather than frustrating because month by month and year by year they see new evidence that their collective efforts do indeed have an impact on student learning. These teachers have a clear sense of purpose and a powerful sense of self-efficacy.

6. Focus on Results

When teachers in a school are truly focused on student learning as their primary mission, they seek valid methods to assess the extent and depth of that learning. — Doug Reeves (2004) Schools should embrace data and information from their common assessments because the assessments provide timely and powerful insight into the learning of their students. These assessments for learning give them greater power, individually and collectively, to meet the needs of their students. Teams must monitor students on a timely basis, developing a systematic process of intervention. They should direct students to devote the time and avail themselves of the support that will lead to success.

7. Strong Principals Who Empower Teachers (Simultaneous Loose/Tight Leadership)

A comprehensive study of the restructuring movement in education led to two significant conclusions: first, a strong professional learning community was critical to gains in student achievement, and second the principals who led those learning communities were committed to empowering their teachers. “Leaders in school with strong professional communities . . . delegated authority, developed collaborative decision making processes, and stepped back from being the central problem solver. Instead they turned to the professional communities for critical decisions.” (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996, p. 193) Leadership styles of the principals who built the learning communities in the four schools this book has considered. Leadership was widely distributed in each of the four schools. Teams can designate a team leader for their course-specific, grade-level, and interdisciplinary team. the collaborative team process in place in each of the schools was designed to encourage very fluid situational leadership.

8. Commitments to Face Adversity, Conflict, and Anxiety

Enthusiastic advocates for the collaborative culture and systematic interventions that are so critical to the PLC concept. Faculty came to understand that the school stood for certain principles that every staff member was expected to honor.

Ineffective teams will ignore the problem, letting it fester and build until resentment and frustration lead to an explosion of accusations and recrimination.

The problem in schools is that teams almost never start out as great teams. Before they can get to the point where team members can work together to resolve the matter, it is likely that they will need the “boss” or principal to help remedy the situation. If, at that critical moment, the staff observes their principal is unwilling to confront obvious violations of PLC concepts, the initiative will soon begin to unravel. The norms of behavior for any organization are shaped by what the leaders tolerate (Bossidy & Charan, 2002)

Principals must place a higher priority on promoting PLC concepts than on “getting along” with staff or avoiding conflict.

Principals must disperse rather than hoard power because “shared or ‘distributive leadership’ brings the learning community together in a common commitment and shared responsibility for sustaining improvement” (National Commission on Teaching, 2003). When teachers feel they have a voice in the improvement process, they will view change as something that is done to them rather than by them.

Principals who hope to lead learning communities must be unequivocal champions, promoters, and protectors of key PLC concepts, and that is not a job they can delegate to someone else. Those who become skilled in this approach to leadership clarify the core concepts of the organization for its members, concepts that are sacred and not to be violated.

9. The Same Guiding Phrase

We do whatever it takes.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES TO SYSTEMATIC INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS.

To help all students learn at a high level, teachers must monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis and create procedures to ensure that students receive additional time and support when they experience difficulty in learning. The support should include a number of interventions where students are directed rather than invited to avail themselves of the system.

Creating a System of Interventions

1. **Doesn’t this system of interventions simply enable students to act irresponsibly?** A school that made learning its primary focus, however, would never consider absolving the student of the responsibility for completing an assignment as an appropriate consequence – particularly if the assignment was given with the assumption that it would promote student learning.
2. **Are we forgetting the whole child?** High performers recognized instead of choosing between A or B, figured out ways to have both A and B.
3. **But aren’t we neglecting the gifted and high achieving children?** Teams differentiated instruction – beyond anything a teacher working in isolation could ever do. Students who demonstrated proficiency on the essential skills and concepts were provided enrichment opportunities at the same time each day that some of their classmates received the additional time and support they needed to become proficient in the essentials. One key to becoming a PLC is a willingness to honestly assess the current reality of the school. An honest assessment of the data of each of the four schools highlighted in this book can only lead to one conclusion: A commitment to the success of every student benefits students of all abilities. A rising tide does indeed raise all boats.
4. **Isn’t this what special education is designed to do?** The more it includes special education students in mainstream classes, the higher the results they achieve as a school.

Building Shared Knowledge

Learning organizations will legitimize dissent. . . The value of resisters has been missed. Trying to manipulate the change process to eliminate resistance is futile. A more successful process is listening to those who are resisting and seeking to understand what lies behind their resistance.

Challenges to PLC concepts provide leaders of the initiative with the opportunity to model the collective inquiry that characterizes a learning organization. Effective leaders will initiate dialogue, a process whereby participants seek to understand each other's perspectives, assumptions, and thought processes. They will advocate for their position and explain why they came to their conclusions, but they will also encourage others to question that position and will invite them to share the reasons behind their reservations. They will build shared knowledge with resisters in the belief that if people have access to the same pool of knowledge, they are more likely to arrive at the same conclusion.

Honoring the challenges of a resister and engaging in collective inquiry is not just a strategy for reaching consensus: it is a powerful tool for deepening one's own understanding of an issue.

CREATING A STRETCH CULTURE: A PROCESS, NOT A PROGRAM

Probably the most important and the most difficult job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture of a school. . . . Ultimately, a school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have.

Good stretch goals move people's focus from a determination to be as good as we have to be and ask instead, how good can we be. — Noel Tichy, 1997, p 143

"Our work has demonstrated that a professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school's operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before." Andy Hargreaves (2004)

School improvement initiatives have typically focused on the structure of the school – the programs, policies, procedures, rules, and hierarchical relationships that govern the school. Unfortunately, structural changes have little lasting impact unless the changes ultimately become deeply rooted in the school's culture – the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, values, and habits that constitute the norm for that school. Culture has been defined as "the assumptions we don't see" (Schein, 1992) the culture of any organization shapes how people think, feel, and act. It explains their view of the world, reinforces their interpretation of events, and instructs them in appropriate conduct.

"Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability"

Cultural Shifts for Developing the Culture of a Professional Learning Community From a Focus on Teaching to a Focus on Learning

The single most important step a school will take on the journey to becoming a PLC will be the adoption of learning as the central purpose of the school. It is virtually impossible to improve the achievement levels of large numbers of students across all abilities and backgrounds unless teachers are clear and consistent regarding what they expect students to learn in each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. It is also imperative that teachers gather evidence of each student's learning through multiple forms of collaboratively developed assessments. Finally, the staff must develop a plan to identify students who experience initial difficulty in learning and provide those students with additional time and support for learning in a systematic way.

From Working in Isolation to Working Collaboratively

It should be evident that schools will never realize the fundamental purpose of helping all students achieve at high levels if the educators within them work in isolation. Staff can identify the strengths and weaknesses in their own instruction only if teachers work together to develop common assessments analyze the results, and assist one another with areas of concern. Staff members should work together to build processes to provide those students with additional time and support in systematic way.

When collaboration focused on student learning becomes deeply embedded in the culture of a school, not only will students achieve higher levels, but the school will develop higher quality solutions to problems; experience increased confidence among staff; expand the pool of ideas, methods, and materials available to each teacher; have the ability to test new ideas, and provide greater support for new teachers entering the school (Little, 1990)

If a school becomes clear about and committed to the fundamental purpose of learning for all, decisions about what needs to be done become evident. Building a collaborative culture is a *sine qua non* of a PLC.

From Focusing on Activities to Focusing on Results

A PLC does not confuse activity with effectiveness. Instead, it continually challenges the people within the school to work together to answer the question, “What impact will this activity have on our fundamental purpose of learning for all?” The emphasis of staff development shifts from workshops to the workplace, from an external focus to learning in the setting where teachers work, from individual learning to group and organizational learning, and from a focus on activities to a focus on results. (Fullan, 2001)

From Fixed Time to Flexible Time

In a PLC, time is considered a critical component in learning, and the school becomes resourceful in providing additional time for students who need it. If learning is to be the constant for all students, time must become a variable. Educators have the ability to create a schedule that supports rather than restricts student learning.

From Average Learning to Individual Learning

When a staff is committed to high levels of learning for all students, averages reveal very little. A PLC will monitor the learning of each individual student and intervene when that student experiences difficulty.

From Punitive to Positive

A school must require the student to learn the material he or she missed during an absence. Incentives and privileges for students that would encourage them to attend to their learning and abide by rules are essential to maintaining a safe and orderly environment. The school would think positive, not punitive.

From “Teacher Tell/Student Listen” to “Teacher Coaching/Student Practice”

Much of what goes on in classrooms is based on a model of “teacher talk” and “Student listen.” Adults come each day to work very, very hard, and children come to watch them work. One of the keys to high levels of student learning is to design their classrooms and instruction to ensure that students do the work. Most of us learn by doing, so they begin to view themselves not as dispensers of knowledge to passive participants but as coaches

who guide students with clear direction, incremental steps, repeated practice, and immediate feedback as students work their way through the learning process.

From Recognizing the Elite to Creating Opportunity for Many Winners

When Peters and Waterman (1982) examined the characteristics of excellent organizations, they found these high performers shaped their culture by consciously developing systems to generate lots of winners and then celebrating individual and collective achievements.

The Stretch Culture of a Professional Learning Community

A stretch culture rests upon high expectations, which has been defined as the positive inferences teachers make about the future academic achievement of their students (Brophy & Good, 1980)

- A climate of high expectations require more than cheerleading.
- Demanding more of students without providing them additional support or expanding the skills of their teachers is unlikely to motivate students to reach higher

It is not the perception of a staff regarding the ability of their *students* that is paramount in creating a culture of high expectations. The staff members' perception of their *own personal and collective ability* to help all students learn is far more critical.

Add to that sense of confidence the caring and compassion that characterize all great teachers, and we have an illustration of teacher self-efficacy that generates the high expectations for student achievement essential to a stretch culture.

Schools staff should work together collaboratively to develop their collective capacity to meet the needs of their students. They will look in the mirror for solutions. Ultimately, what will make the difference is not the standards themselves, but the self-efficacy of the staff. It is within their sphere of influence to impact student achievement in a positive way.

Promoting Collective Self-Efficacy

Call upon teachers to build Professional Learning Communities – to work together to clarify essential student outcomes, gather timely evidence regarding student learning, and collaborate with one another to identify ways to address student weaknesses and build upon student strengths.

Rick Stiggins (2002) refers to this process as assessment for learning in contrast to summative state and national tests, which represent assessment of learning. He contends that teachers are engaged in assessment for learning when they work together to:

- Understand and articulate in *advance of teaching* the achievement targets that their students are to hit. Answer the question, “What is it we want our students to know and be able to do as a result of this course, grade level, or unit?”)
- Inform their students about those learning goals *in terms that students understand*, from the very beginning of the teaching and learning process.
- Develop assessment exercises and scoring procedures that *accurately reflect student* achievement. (Answer the question, “How will we know if each student has learned?”)

- Use classroom assessments to *build students' confidence* in themselves as learners and help them take responsibility for their own learning, so as to lay a foundation for lifelong learning.
- Translate classroom assessment results into frequent *descriptive feedback* (vs. judgmental feedback) for students that provide them with specific insights as to how to improve (such as helping students understand the criteria that will be used to judge the quality of their work).
- Continuously *adjust instruction* based on the results of classroom assessments. (Use formative assessments as the impetus for discussing, "How will we respond when our students experience difficulty in learning?")
- Engage students in *regular self-assessment* with standards held constant so that students can watch themselves grow over time and thus feel in charge of their own success (for example, train students to apply the criteria by which their work will be judged).
- Actively involve students in communicating with their teacher and their families about their achievement status and improvement

This process will serve as a stimulus for greater teacher self-efficacy and higher levels of student achievement *only* if staff members work through it collaboratively.

Success will occur when teachers work together to:

1. Clarify outcomes
2. Establish common formative assessments
3. Gather frequent information on the achievement of their students
4. And share their findings with one another

Two of the most significant steps a school can take to foster self-efficacy among staff are to stop:

1. The isolated, private practice of independent subcontractors
2. Insist on collaborative teams in which members share their practices and their results – success as well as setbacks.

Henry Louis Gates concludes, "Collecting data is only the first step toward wisdom, but sharing data is the beginning of community". Begin to create effective systems of intervention that ensure struggling students receive additional time and support, their collective sense of confidence in their ability to help all students will be enhanced. Both strategies - (1) building a collaborative culture that focuses on student learning and (2) creating a system of timely interventions for students – experience a powerful synergy.

Building Momentum Through Short-Term Wins

Translate PLC concepts into small steps and celebrating the attainment of each step. The process of becoming a PLC does not occur as a single, dramatic breakthrough or miracle moment. Instead the process requires sustaining a consistent, coherent effort for an extended period of time. Jim Collins' (2002) description of organizations that made the leap from "good to great" also applies to schools that are able to make significant advancements on the PLC continuum. As he wrote:

Good to great transformations never happened in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, and no wrenching revolution. Good to great comes by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained and spectacular results'

Leaders recognize the need for specific, short-term implementation steps to advance those ideas. The implementation and celebration of small steps generate both a sense of self-efficacy for staff and the momentum essential for improvement initiatives. Kouzes and Posner (1987) advise leaders to “break down big problems into small, doable steps. . . plan for small wins. Small wins form the basis for a consistent pattern of winning that appeal to people’s desire to belong to a successful venture. . . A series of small wins provides a foundation of stable building blocks for change”. Win small, win early win often (2000)

Successful principals planned for short-term wins to sustain momentum. They established calendars that called for the completion of projects in weeks and months rather than years, and they helped teams establish interim goals as stepping stones to more ambitious stretch goals. They set out to make celebration a significant part of the culture of the school, a collective ovation for the accomplishments of specific teams or the school in general. “Share the Learning”

The Power of Stories

Effective leaders recognize this fact and use stories to shape the culture of their organizations, to engage people through vibrant stories has been described as “an essential prerequisite” (Tichy, 1997)

Successful principals should use public assemblies as a forum for preaching the message that “we are achieving great thing, we are becoming the school we hoped to become, because of our collective efforts”. Principals should publicly acknowledge individuals and teams whose efforts demonstrated the vision and values of the school.

These principals promoted a palpable sense of self-efficacy among their entire staff because they were attentive to creating conditions for short-term wins and immersing teachers in a culture that celebrated those wins as evidence of the school’s success.

Why Not Now?

Those who make the most progress are those who take action. Mike Schmoker (2004) who found a negative correlation between the time spent preparing and developing strategic plans and actual progress on the PLC journey. Teachers and principals who do the best job in learning what it takes to build a PLC are those who immerse themselves in the process. They act, they make mistakes, they learn from their mistakes, and then they begin again more intelligently. **JUST DO IT.** As Steven Covey (2002) admonishes, “To know and not to do is really not to know”

A Final Analogy

As with the spacecraft Apollo 13, “Failure is not an option.” Keep building a greater collective knowledge than you’ve ever had before and keep working together collaboratively and building upon each other’s insights and strengths.